

# Lecture 4 –The Happiness Turn

Dr. Mat Savelli

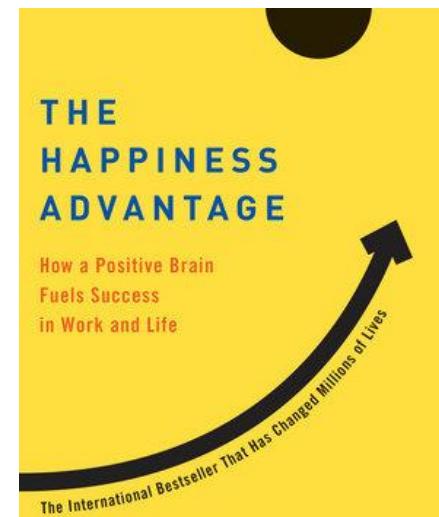
[msavelli@mcmaster.ca](mailto:msavelli@mcmaster.ca)

# Essay

- 1500 words, 1.5 spacing, details on A2L.
- Minimum of six peer-reviewed sources.
- Citations & bibliography in APA.
- Oct 3 v Oct 7 deadlines
- Be sure to answer the question...
- Article databases are your friend.

# Into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

- From “century of the psy-ences,” to 21<sup>st</sup> c. entrenchment of psy-knowledge into daily life.
- Psy-disciplines now interested in enhancement, “maximizing human potential.”
- Governance over psychological life increasingly performed by laypeople.
  - Demedicalization or simply the entrenchment of medicalized (psy) knowledge among lay people?
- For some scholars, closely tied to rise of neoliberalism.
  - Market as solution to human problems.
  - Laissez-faire economics.
  - Small state.
  - Emphasis on individualism.



# Key Questions

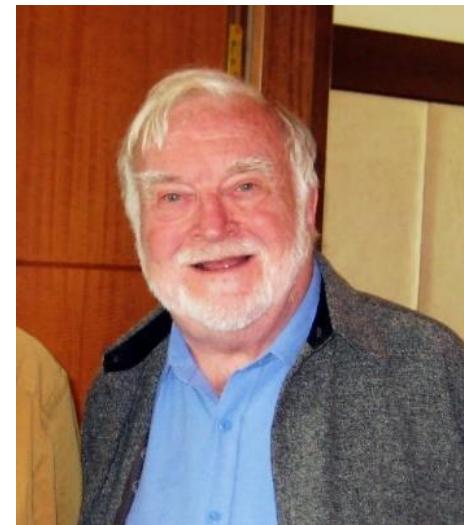
- How can we explain the emergence of positive psychology and how has it impacted our notions of mental health?
- How has positive psychology shaped everyday practices of mental health?
- Where does positive psych and its offshoots fit into broader narratives about the psy-disciplines?
- How has this shift among the psy-disciplines impacted society more broadly?

# The Arrival of CBT

- Roots in early 20<sup>th</sup> c. behaviourism (e.g. Watson, Pavlov, Skinner), itself informed by positivism.
  - Psychology should adopt the scientific method, focus on observable and classifiable behaviour, not introspection.
  - Behaviour as something learned.
- Mid 20<sup>th</sup> c. recognition that human behaviour is filtered through thoughts:
  - Ellis: distress arises from *thoughts* about an event.
  - Beck: *automatic thoughts* are identifiable and treatable.
- New treatment methods emerge, w/ emphasis on reshaping thoughts. By 21<sup>st</sup> c., CBT dominant.

# Emergence of Positive Psychology

- Against backdrop of cognitive-behaviourists supplanting psychoanalysts, Seligman's "epiphany in the garden" in 1990s.
- As new head of APA, psych must turn away from "the negative" to study the "universal science of happiness."
- Csikszentmihayli: how do people remain strong and happy, despite living in chaos and disruption?
  - "Flow."
- Positive psychology emerges as the study of positive experience, human strengths, virtues.

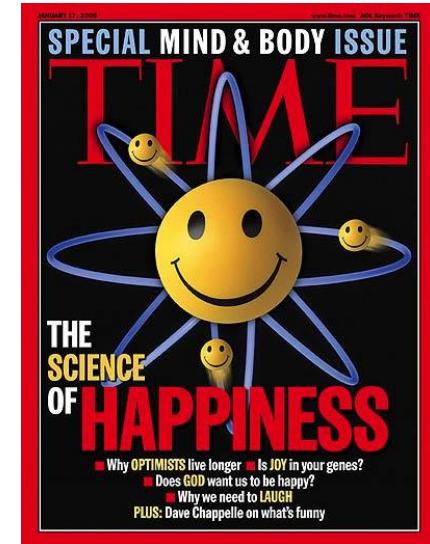


# Key Tenets of Positive Psychology

- Emotions learned, cognitive outlook is key.
  - Inverts Freudian theory that thoughts driven by underlying emotions (themselves products of life experiences).
- A positive outlook is good for you, negativity is bad. Happiness has a looping “multiplier effect.”
- Seligman: rather than curing “negative states,” psychology should strive to augment individual’s ability to prevent mental illness and foster mental health. How?
  - Courage, optimism, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, flow, and insight could all be buffers against mental illness.
  - Pursuance of wellbeing, namely positive emotion (the pleasant life), engagement (living in the present), finding meaning in life, having goals and striving towards achievement, and developing relationships.

# Explosion of Positive Psychology

- Proliferated through media, academia, professional practice.
- The “science” of happiness: optimism as good for virtually all aspects of life.
  - “Healing effect”, e.g:
    - Fredrickson: positivity undoes damage that negativity causes to cardio system.
    - Segerstrom: positive thoughts boost the immune system.
- PP’s discourse infiltrates everyday practice. Examples?
  - Gratitude exercises, strength-focused business meetings, etc.
- Leads to new wellness industry.



# Mindfulness

- From Buddhism to '60s California, simplified for mass consumption.
- Used by PP as teachable technique to guard against mental health problems, increase life satisfaction, aid learning, etc.
- Encourages vigilance against “negative” emotions/thoughts.
- Scholarly critiques:
  - Reveley: imparts self-responsibilization, aligns closely w/ neoliberalism.
  - Barker: despite non-medical practice, reinforces distress and discomfort as illness which necessitates treatment.



# The Happiness Turn

- These developments exemplify what scholars call “the happiness turn,” an intellectual and cultural shift.
- Ahmed: taught to believe that (a) happiness is a ‘thing’ – a condition that can be concretely achieved (rather than a conceptual ideal), (b) that happiness is always desirable, and (c) that happiness can be identified and measured.
- Discourse of happiness ubiquitous, defining norms around what is good, desirable, healthy, and prosperous.
- Those who pursue the “right happiness” rewarded. Others punished.
  - Consider “guilty pleasures.”
- Ultimately, happiness as a *choice* that one makes.





# Decontextualizing Happiness



- Many scholars have critiqued the Happiness Turn. Why?
  - “Universal truths” about the “science of happiness” often grounded in culture of individualism, encouraging self-focus.
  - Accountability: PP and mindfulness obscure the social for the individual/psychological.
    - Assumptions about what makes happiness possible limited to those in particular contexts.
    - Teaches individuals *they must insulate themselves* against misfortune.
  - Binkley: PP both a response to (and enabler of) neoliberalism and its associated policies (e.g. cutting social safety net).

# Science and Positive Psychology

- Scholars: PP envelopes itself within the façade of science.
- Perez-Alvarez: PP uses the social capital of science to mask its underlying ideological character.
- Wilson: mindfulness uses the rhetoric of science to shift expertise (on things like how to live a meaningful life) from religious/philosophical realm to a medical one.
- Others critique the claims made by positive psychology (“happiness makes you live longer!”), arguing that flawed methods have hurt credibility of the discipline.
  - E.g. positive psychology’s *tautologies*: “those who are more satisfied in their life are happier.”
  - PP selective in its logic, e.g automatic negative thoughts are baseless, but automatic positive thoughts are fine.
  - Other studies cast doubt on benefits of positivity: e.g. “defensive pessimists” might make better decisions than optimists, etc.

# Happiness as Imperative

- Cabanas: happiness presented as the logical consequence of following the ‘science’ of happiness functions as a set of “ought tos.” Failing to achieve happiness thus positioned as a sign of individual malfunction.
- Held: the “tyranny of positive attitude:” be happy or face the consequences.
  - Obscures the “benefits of the negative.”
- Ehrenreich (in *Smile or Die*): “Breast cancer...did not make me prettier or stronger, more feminine or spiritual. What it gave me, if you want to call this a ‘gift’, was a very personal, agonizing encounter with an ideological force in American culture that I had not been aware of before – one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune, and blame only ourselves for our fate.”

# Further Critiques of Happiness Turn

- Happiness transformed to something clearly identifiable, measurable, and consumable:
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oF0-28MOoU>
  - Assumes how we “really feel” can be measured biologically (here as a binary). Predicated on a “universal human being” against which all others can be measured.
- Critics: wellness industry preys upon insecurities regarding being well, something felt more keenly since happiness understood as an imperative.
- What we assign as ‘proper’ sources of happiness may police certain activities and prioritize others.
  - It is thus worth asking: who benefits from this vision of happiness? What are the possible outcomes?

# Conclusions

- By 21<sup>st</sup> c. psy-disciplines focused on psyche as learned, rooted in cognitive frameworks.
- Arrival of PP reflects and perpetuates a broader trend wherein human beings imagined as measurable, categorizable.
- Happiness itself redefined: from intangible and personal to *definable, universal, and purchasable*.
- Happiness turn predicated upon a version of selfhood in which we are fully aware of how we feel (and capable of altering how we feel). Promotes individual responsibility for our fate.
- PP pushes psy-practices and knowledge into lay domain w/o inherent demedicalization.
- Claims scientific domain over wider array of human feelings, thoughts, and behaviour.